

IZINDABA



A POLITICAL PEACE MAKER FOR HEALTH?



Renier Schoeman

With six years of deputy ministering under his belt, South Africa's new Deputy Minister of Health, Renier Schoeman, says his main agenda is 'not to have one set for me'.

'I'm not going to be sucked into this quagmire of controversies, which in some cases are artificially encouraged. My basic philosophy will be to try and find commonality and agreement on the many issues,' he told the *SAMJ*, two weeks after being sworn in.

A former deputy minister of Foreign Affairs under Pik Botha (1991-1994) and subsequently deputy minister of education in the Government of National Unity under Nelson Mandela (1994-1996), Schoeman is under no illusions about his latest job.

'The scope of activity is enormous – I didn't realise how wide ranging it was. Apart from the massive sectors like hospitals and primary health care, you have the medical aid schemes, pharmaceutical control, mental health. It's massively varied,' he noted.

Deputy President Jacob Zuma, who officiated at his swearing in and that of NNP colleague, David Malatsi as Social Development deputy minister in November, cited the work pressure of the two portfolios as decisive in creating the new posts.

The appointments are reward for the NNP having delivered the Western Cape to the ANC after amended floor-crossing legislation overcame legal challenges in the courts.

At the time of the *SAMJ* interview, Schoeman had spent one hour with Minister Tshablala-Msimang, attended four cabinet committee meetings, been introduced to Health Director General, Dr Ayanda Ntsaluba, and had studied the health department's annual report.

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'We had to agree on certain processes to fast-track my familiarisation with the ministry which will include briefings at head office in Pretoria this week. We've not moved to specificity yet,' he explained. His primary focus would be familiarising himself with departmental matters.

'What I've said to myself, and not to many other people, is that the whole question of the hospital sector taking such a massive chunk of the budget...it being so immediate in so many people's lives when they're in need of care, read together with the needs of primary health care...in terms of the implication for ordinary people, it's caught my attention and imagination.'

While conceding that hospitals were a provincial function, he maintained that, 'this doesn't mean one can't interest oneself'.

He saw the challenge as trying to avoid the 'either tertiary or primary care syndrome – we need to strike a balance. Anyone will acknowledge that the primary sector is a challenge all on its own but that doesn't say tertiary can collapse. That would be lunacy,' he added.

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Schoeman said people dying in waiting rooms or being referred to other hospitals by bureaucrats was 'the kind of horror story that I'm very taken by. Whoever these functionaries are, they need to rectify that kind of thinking,' he said.

The NNP had always argued that the health portfolio should be elevated above partisan bickering, and 'that is still our view'.

A one-time private secretary to Finance Minister Owen Horwood (1972–1980), Schoeman entered party politics in 1981, a time he describes as, 'already a turning point for the NP'.

'That was the year the Conservative Party broke away or were forced out and we began our long process of self-examination,' he said.

As Deputy Foreign Minister a decade later, Schoeman became intimately involved in 'selling' the unbanning of the ANC to the world.

As co-leader of the NP in KwaZulu-Natal in 1992, he led the referendum campaign and soon found himself serving under President Nelson Mandela and Professor Sibusiso Bengu as Deputy Minister of Education.

'Apparently my apartheid past didn't count that much,' he said in a direct side-swipe at recent press reports labelling him 'an old blood Nat loyalist who joined the party at the height of the apartheid era'.

Doctors in the public service privately expressed hope that Schoeman's experience and skills might have a positive impact on a ministry in which they have often found themselves embroiled in human rights disputes.

Chris Bateman